

# The Transition Theory

by Dr. Wallace McLeod

## WHY I STILL BELIEVE IN THE TRANSITION THEORY: OPERATIVE TO SPECULATIVE

*[In recent years a new theory about the origins of modern speculative Freemasonry has come into fashion. Several of its strongest supporters are my friends and colleagues from Quatuor Coronati Lodge. In this matter I think that they are wrong, and that the older view still provides a better explanation of the evidence. The following pages attempt to explain why.]*

### THE PROBLEM

The traditional view, ever since the time of Anderson's *Constitutions* of 1723, has been that in some way the modern speculative Freemasons are the successors of the English operative stonemasons of the Middle Ages, and that they hardly existed before the year 1717. You will find this idea set forth more than once in the pages of this book.

A few years ago some of the evidence began to be interpreted in a different way. "In England ... in the 17th century ... lodges began to appear which from their inception were independent of the mason trade" (Eric Ward, AQC 91 [1978] 81).

This new speculative Masonry "may first have been devised as a cover for conspiratorial meetings of Royalist groups" (F. W. Seal-Coon, AQC 92 [1979] 200). "Records which . . . relate to speculative Masonry ... date from before 1600" (Colin Dyer, AQC 95 [1982] 120). "By the 1600s the guild system . . . was virtually moribund.... Accepted masonry ... simply seems to have appeared in England as a new organization without any prior connections with the operative craft" (John Hamill, *The Craft*, Wellingborough, Northamptonshire, 1986, page 19).

### THE SO-CALLED GAP FROM ABOUT 1400 to 1583

I still subscribe to the outmoded view that speculative Freemasonry "descends" from operative stonemasonry. I am pushed in this direction by certain questions that arise out of the evidence. One of the points that is regularly noted in support of the new theory is that no copies of the *Old Charges* survive from the period between the two oldest versions, the *Regius* and *Cooke Manuscripts* (conventionally abbreviated A and B; both written in the years around 1400) and the *Grand Lodge Manuscript* No 1 (D.a.1, of 1583). This seems at first blush to argue against the notion that the older and the more recent versions belong to the same tradition. And it is further suggested that while the older copies may well be operative, the ones after 1583 on are speculative from the very beginning.

In fact this "gap" is more apparent than real. In the first place paper and even parchment are hardly the most durable of human artifacts. With constant use they become soiled, dog-eared, and illegible. They are liable to damage or destruction by fire, moisture, mildew, by insects or animals. They may come into the hands of new owners who discard them, or use them to kindle the fire or wrap the garbage. And

these threats to their existence are cumulative; early specimens are scarcer than later ones. Evidently thousands of scraps of paper from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries have vanished without trace.

The lost copies of the *Old Charges* have not vanished without trace. We can readily establish the existence of some eight texts which were written in the period under review. Some are known only from allusions or quotations made before their disappearance. (Further details may be found in Douglas Knoop and G. P. Jones, *A Handlist of Masonic Documents*, Manchester, 1942, and in Herbert Poole's revision of *Gould's History of Freemasonry*, London, 1951, volume 1, pages 48-76.)

1. **Dermott's Manuscript (X.4).** According to the Minutes of the *Grand Lodge of the Antients* for 6 December 1752, "The Grand Secretary [Dermott] produced a very Old Manuscript written or copied by one Bramhall of Canterbury in the Reign of King Henry the Seventh" (who ruled 1485-1509). We know that the Premier Grand Lodge had been interested in the *Old Charges*, and that its officers had sought them out, and copied them, and displayed them at meetings. It is generally conceded that the Antients were trying to do the same thing, and that therefore this must have been a copy of the *Old Charges*.
2. **Wilson's Manuscript (X.5).** A marginal note to *Preston's Manifesto* of the ... Lodge of Antiquity (1778) mentions a manuscript "in the hands of Mr Wilson, of Broomhead, near Sheffield, Yorkshire, written in the reign of K. Henry 8th" (1509-1547). It is hard to imagine that this old masonic manuscript was anything but a copy of the *Old Charges*.
3. **Levander-York Original.** At the end of the one of the versions of the *Old Charges*, the Levander-York Manuscript (D.b.41, which is dated about 1740) is a note explaining that it was "Copy'd from the Original engross'd on Abortive" [that is, on parchment] "in the Year 1560."
4. **Melrose Manuscript No 1. (X. 1).** A Scottish copy of the *Old Charges*, known as the Melrose Manuscript No 2 (D.sundry.12, 1674) closes with a somewhat cryptic note suggesting that the text was transcribed from an older manuscript that had been written in 1581 by Robert Winsester.

## THE GRAND DESIGN

The existence of other lost manuscripts must be postulated in order to account for the distribution of readings in the extant texts.

5. **Plot Family Archetype (C).** One group of the *Old Charges* is known as the "Plot Family." Its six surviving members are all later than the period in question. Four of them, however (Poole Abstract, C.5, 1665; *Heade Manuscript*, C 4, 1675; Plot Abstract, C. 1, 1686; *Watson Manuscript*, C.2, 1687), include a statement that in its original form ran something like this: "These charges have been seen and perused by our late sovereign lord King Henry the Sixth and the Lords of his Honorable Council; and they have allowed them well, and said that they were right good and reasonable to be holden." Henry VI died in 1471. It follows that the statement, and the text in which it is embedded, must have been composed within the next two generations, 1470-1530, while the king's memory was still fresh.

6. **Standard Original (TDE).** The ancestor of most (95) of the Old Charges is generally known as the "Standard Original" version. It is lost, but in the Appendix to the printed version of my Prestonian Lecture I try to reconstruct its text. It was clearly a rewriting of a member of the Plot Family. It is therefore later than number (5) above; it was composed at some date within the period 1520-80, probably during the first half.
7. **Grand Lodge Family Original (D).** The fifty-three texts of the Grand Lodge Family are all descended from a single version, which (like so many others) has not survived the centuries. It was a copy of number (6) above, but one that incorporated a few distinctive changes that were passed on to its descendants. Clearly this "Grand Lodge Family Original" must have been written later than the Standard Original.
8. **Grand Lodge Branch Original (D.a).** The eight texts that are classified as the Grand Lodge Branch are descended from a single manuscript, which no longer exists. It was a copy of number (7) above, again one which introduced a few easily recognizable changes. It in turn gave rise to the oldest member of the branch, the *Grand Lodge Manuscript No (D.a.1)*, of 1583. It therefore falls between the dates of those two texts.

There is no reason to assume that these eight are the only versions of the *Old Charges* written between c. 1400 and 1583. No doubt there were others. In short, the alleged "gap" is more apparent than real. That is, an interest in the old charges does not suddenly spring up in 1583. Can we make the evidence go away by ignoring it?

## OTHER ARGUMENTS FOR CONTINUITY

1. The "Charges Singular," found in most versions of the *Old Charges*, contain regulations that are clearly intended for operative masons. For example, "No Master shall take upon him no lord's work, but that he know himself able and cunning to perform the same.... No Master nor Fellow set no layer ... to hew mould stones with no mould of his own making." This text was copied hundreds of times in the years after 1583. If it was all a fantasy or a sham, intended for non-operatives, why bother?
2. It is usually assumed that Elias Ashmole, whose diary reports that he was made a Free-Mason in 1646, was a gentleman mason, unconnected with operative masonry. Dr David Stevenson, Director of the Centre for Scottish Studies at the University of Aberdeen, has noted that he was in fact a master gunner, and that there was an affinity between the two mathematical crafts (masonry and artillery). In Scotland the King's Master Gunner was often the same man as the King's Master of Works (Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, volume 114, 1984, page 410). When an operative connection is pointed out, do we ignore it in order to accommodate our presuppositions?
3. The so-called "Apprentice Charge" occurs in sixteen versions of the old charges (Herbert Poole, *The Old Charges*, London, 1924, page 38). It was composed no later than 1650, the approximate date of the two oldest texts that include it (Grand Lodge MS No 2, F.2; Hope MS, E.c.5). It uses language appropriate to operative masons. It is clear that the apprentice for the term of his service is expected to dwell in the household of his master. Some of the terms

include: "You shall truly honor ... your Master and Dame; you shall not absent yourself but with the licence of both or one of them by day or night.... You shall not disclose your Master or Dame's Counsel or Secrets which they have imparted to you, or what is to be concealed, spoken or done within the precincts of your house by them or either of them." Seven more copies appear before 1700. Are we to imagine, if operative Masonry was extinct in England by that date, and the manuscripts were being copied exclusively for nonoperative use, that some creative genius, not content with the revised text of the Old Charges that was in current use, composed a new completely fictional set of regulations, out of whole cloth, as it were, for the edification of non-operative lodges?

4. The newly discovered Dundee Manuscript No 2 (found a year or so ago in the documents belonging to the Mason Trade in the Royal Burgh of Dundee) is dated to about the year 1650. This version, a perfectly normal text of the old charges belonging to the Grand Lodge Family, was held by an operative lodge that never evolved into a speculative one. It poses, in a more pointed form, the same problem as do the other Scottish texts that come from lodges that did pass through a transitional stage (none of the Scottish texts antedates 1650.) Are we to imagine that when the Scottish operative lodges decided to take over the English text of the Old Charges, they were prepared to adopt a text that was used only by non-operative gentlemen Masons in the Southron realm?
5. At some date between 1672 and 1675 the antiquary and herald Randle Holme III recorded the members of a lodge at Chester. Most of the twenty-six names have been identified in municipal documents. Eighteen, and perhaps as many as twenty, were directly engaged in occupations associated with domestic architecture (masons, bricklayers, carpenters, slaters, plasterers, glaziers; Poole, Gould's *History of Freemasonry*, volume 2, pages 114-120). Does this suggest that the lodge was divorced from the trade?
6. In 1686, Robert Plot, Professor of Chemistry at the University of Oxford, published a book called *The Natural History of Staffordshire*. In it he included a description of the Society of Free-Masons. He says that "persons of the most eminent quality . . . did not disdain to be of the Fellowship." It is clear from his description that gentleman masons, that is to say, nonoperatives, were being accepted at this date. But other parts of his description make it clear that there was still a strong operative component in the lodges. If a stranger appears and gives a Masonic sign, another Mason is obliged to come to him at once, "tho' from the top of a Steeple." Plot goes on to state that the members of the lodges "advise the Masters they work for, . . . acquainting them with the badness or goodness of their materials; and if they be any way out in the contrivance of their buildings modestly to rectify them in it" (Douglas Knoop, G. P. Jones, Douglas Hamer, *Early Masonic Pamphlets*, Manchester, 1945, pages 31-32). This language is not compatible with purely speculative lodges.
7. Three of the texts of the old charges have additional "orders" for operative masons, with fines assessed for infractions. Two are from the "late" operative lodges at Gateshead (H.2) and Alnwick (E.a.10). The third is the Taylor MS (E.a.19), which antedates 1700. For example: "No Mason shall take any work by task or by day, other than the King's work, but that at the least he shall make three or four of his Fellows acquainted therewith, for to take his part; paying for

every such offense the sum of £3 6s. 8d." "That no rough layers or any other that has not served their time, or Admitted Masons shall work within the lodge any work of Masonry whatsoever, except under a Master; for every such offense shall pay £3 13s. 4d." Did some speculative mason invent these "orders" for non-operative lodges, with penalties that were never meant to be exacted? Or did some operative mason append them to a speculative document?

These, and questions like these, are never *asked*, let alone *answered*, by those who want to see only speculative masonry in the seventeenth century. They persuade me that we still have operative lodges, or largely operative lodges, flourishing in mid-seventeenth century England, at the time when a broadening interest in the old charges is evident.

---

Wallace McLeod (1931- ), *The Grand Design. Selected Masonic Addresses and Papers of Wallace McLeod*. Highland Springs, Virginia : Anchor Communications, 1991. ISBN : 0-935633-10-3 hc 199pp., pp. 46-50.